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ABSTRACT

Interest in the phenomenon of oral communication is rapidly growing in organizations which range in size from giant corporations to small companies. This discussion focuses on practices in and attitudes toward speech training in the advertising industry. Information was gleaned from interviews with the executives of the 25 largest advertising agencies in American--most of those questioned were directors of personnel. A majority of this group felt that the quality of speech and communication skills had deteriorated over the past ten years and cited reasons such as the failure of schools to provide adequate training, increased television viewing, and so on. Among the factors contributing to executives' heightened concern for communication competence were recession in business, the rise of consumerism, the establishment of Affirmative Action hiring programs, and the electronic future. A number of training programs were used: periodic classes over a period of time, in-depth "crash" seminars which last two or three days, and commercial programs such as "Communispond." A majority of the speech consultants involved in these programs also felt that change should be instituted in the teaching of speech in school. (KS)

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MANAGEMENT LISTENS TO ITS OWN SPEECH

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MANAGEMENT LISTENS TO ITS OWN SPEECH

James R. Moore is a speech major.

He stands in front of his class and delivers a five-minute "Speech to Persuade." At its conclusion, his teacher and fellow students rip into his poor organization, his aimless gesturing, his lack of eye-contact and his rapid rate.

Sound familiar?

Well, it's not. James R. Moore is not your ordinary speech major. He is the forty-four year old executive vice-president of one of the world's largest advertising agencies. His class room is a carpeted and elegantly furnished Madison Avenue conference room, and his seven classmates are all vice-presidents of the company. Their teacher is a former actor, and their semester will last two days -- for which they will pay a tuition of around $2000.

Mr. Moore is representative of a rapidly proliferating type of speech student: the American businessman. Within the past two or three years, the corporate world has been listening

to its own speech as it never has before -- and doing something about what it's hearing. This active interest in oral communication runs the gamut from giant organizations like IBM, Exxon, ITT and Westinghouse, to small ten-man companies.

For the purposes of this speech, the concentration will be on one segment of that business world: the advertising industry. I have selected advertising because, in the first place, it is a "communications" business, and, secondly, because it appears to be a spawning ground for some of the major speech-training centers serving the entire business community.

My information is based on interviews with executives of the 25 largest advertising agencies in America, whose combined billings account for 38% of the total advertising business done in this country. All but one of the executives with whom I spoke were on a vice-presidential level. Most were directors of personnel. Those that were not, were responsible for company management, promotion, public relations, research or client contact. I also interviewed five of the leading speech consultants in the business field.

The majority of advertising people with whom I spoke -- 14 out of the 25 -- felt that the overall quality of speech and communicative skills in America had deteriorated over the past ten years. The over-riding reason given was the failure of the schools to provide adequate speech training. More about this later. Other causes cited were "too much television," "not

enough reading" and "a permissiveness and lowering of standards generally, that pervades life today."

It should be pointed out that not all of the agency executives felt that the state of American speech had worsened. Seven felt it was about the same as it always had been -- which was not necessarily good. Four believed that it had actually improved.

Regardless of whether they felt speech had gotten worse, stayed the same, or improved, however, the vast majority of the advertising agencies -- 18 out of 25 -- either now had or were in the process of beginning some sort of oral communication training program for their executives. Twelve of these had taken this action within the past two years.

Why now? What has motivated so many companies to institute speech programs in such a relatively short period of time?

The recent recession led the list of reasons. Business today is demanding more of its management level personnel -- more productivity, more skill, more efficiency. Twelve of the agencies gave this as the primary reason for the new interest in effective speech. One personnel director put it this way, "In the fat days, there was a lot of overlapping on job responsibilities. So one man wasn't so good at making presentations -- another guy was, and he could do it. With the recession, though, came heavy cut-backs. Everybody had to carry his own weight. Everybody had to be more efficient -- and that included efficiency in communication. For

example, copywriters and art directors who didn't used to be involved much in client presentations, now found themselves having to make those presentations -- and they weren't very good at it!" In every area of management -- creative, account, media, research -- the recession brought on new standards for effectiveness in communication, and the agencies began to take a closer look at their own executives' abilities.

Six agencies mentioned the rise of consumerism, the growing influence of Ralph Nader-like groups, as a significant factor in speech consciousness-raising. Corporation executives who may have functioned very well in a one-to-one, across-the-desk communication situation, suddenly found themselves having to defend and explain company actions in front of consumer groups, on television shows, at public hearings. Many found they were completely at a loss. One agency, Burson-Marsteller, offers training for its client-executives in just this area -- how to handle one's self on a television show, how to deal with reporters' questions, how to communicate effectively under pressure.

Even Watergate got some of the credit for the new surge in speech training. Three agencies commented on this. One of them said, "During the Watergate hearings, and some of the others that followed it, for the first time you saw people who were not trained in public speaking up there testifying ... trying to express them-

selves. There was a lot of talk among businessmen during that time about who came off well, and who didn't. I think it made people acutely aware of the importance of communicating well."

Another major cause for the new interest in better speech, according to six of the advertising executives, has been the establishment of Affirmative Action and other employment programs aimed at bringing more minorities into managerial lines. "'Man,' 'ya know,' and street talk just don't go in a presentation to an 'establishment' client," one personnel director told me. Part of the motivation in his agency's beginning a speech workshop was to provide speech education for these disadvantaged minority-group personnel with executive potential.

There were varied other reasons, too, for the setting-up of agency speech programs. For two agencies, the desire to build employee loyalty and to hold on to valued executives was a factor. "This program is an employee self-improvement thing -- a fringe benefit, if you will," one vice-president said. "It's something the agency offers that's above and beyond the call of duty. We feel our executives appreciate it, and we hope it'll help us keep the people we want to keep."

Three of the companies gave a futuristic reason: the ever-increasing importance of electronics as a communication medium. Where once a company would have brought in its management people to its main office for a conference, now closed circuit TV meetings are being held. Phon-o-vision, videodiscs and other projected

electronic media were also mentioned. Such devices, these agencies felt, were the trend of the future, and they called for special performance and communication skills.

To be ready for that electronic future, and, more importantly for most agencies, to improve the speaking skills of their executives here-and-now, a number of different systems are being used.

The most popular is a 10-week oral communication workshop that meets twice a week for one hour or ninety minute sessions. Seven agencies use this approach. Five others use a two or three day concentrated seminar system -- a kind of "crash" program. Two of these agencies will send a group of six to eight executives away to some near-by resort for a three-day seminar. One agency sends its executives away for a broader, management-training week-long seminar, of which two days will be devoted to oral communication. Other agencies, those that have no regular, structured communication-training program, will send individual executives to a speech specialist, if they feel it is needed.

While only four agencies have actual on-going, in-house communication programs, many others, in effect, have such a program in that as soon as one 10-week workshop is completed, another is begun, and this practice has been going on for two or three years. Agencies that use the two or three day seminar system, tend to hold

them two or three times a year. In all cases, this oral communicatio training is for management-level personnel only. None of the agencies I spoke with either had or was planning any such program for staff personnel.

In one agency, the executive speech work is taught by on-staff members of the personnel department, who themselves had been through a speech-training course. In another, it is handled by a branch of the company's public relations department. Two agencies have business tie-ins with communication-training groups. Ogilvy and Mather, for example, bought Dorothy Sarnoff's "Speech Dynamics" last year, as a subsidiary company.

Probably the largest firm in the communication-training field is Communispond -- a name that reflects a wedding of Communicate and Respond. While it was founded originally by two J. Walter Thompson account executives who were also Dale Carnegie instructors, it is now a company in its own right. Communispond now has offices in New York, Chicago and Washington, and is opening other branches in Boston, Houston, Philadelphia, Denver, Detroit and Los Angeles. Over the past seven years, Communispond has worked with the executives of over 2,000 companies, both in this country and in Europe.

All of the other agencies which have communication programs use outside "free lance" speech consultants. These are individuals, usually with theatre backgrounds, who have set up communication programs which they have sold to the agencies. Dorothy Sarnoff,

Hal Persons, Peter Rogen and Ed Kabbe, who, among them, do most of the speech work for the agencies I interviewed, all have acting and/or directing credentials.

According to their clients, their basic teaching techniques rely heavily on role-playing, theatrics and generating high energy levels. Most of them use videotape as a teaching aid. Except for Dorothy Sarnoff, few of the others get into areas of diction or voice quality per se, except, perhaps, to point out the problem.

How do they work specifically? Here's a write-up on Hal Person's methods that appeared in the BBD&O house-organ:

> "METHOD 101" is the newest course in the BBDO U. curriculum.
>
> Officially, it's called "Oral Communication Work-Shop," but by any name it's a course in method acting designed to help improve the communication and presentation techniques of BBDO executives.
>
> Every Monday night between five and seven about 15 BBDOers convene in the New York 5-5 conference room for sessions conducted by Hal Persons, a former director of television programs. Hal currently runs an acting studio and has adapted the techniques of method acting for use in business communication. The course is composed of 12 sessions. The first six are a series of exercises to demonstrate that successful communication depends on using not just the voice, but the entire body. The last six sessions concentrate on exercises to develop techniques for making effective presentations and conducting meetings. These also include more personalized critiques of speech, gesture and projection.
>
> The exercises themselves are varied. One night each person had to come prepared to tell a joke. Another night was devoted to charades. Midway through the course students had 30 seconds to look over a "crazy chart" loaded with doodles or nonsensical drawings and then talk for four minutes using the chart in the presentation.

> BBDOers are enthusiastic. One graduate commented: "It's a seemingly strange way to stand up and present yourself, but this acting-school approach does teach you to think on your feet and involve those you're addressing. Generally, people were a lot better than they thought they were ... The course definitely builds self-confidence."

Here's the way a Peter Rogen graduate describes his experience,

> I've been in advertising for 20 years, and I've made I don't know how many presentations. I thought I was pretty good until I went to a three-day Peter Rogen seminar. I was amazed at how much I learned. Peter works with eight people -- it's a round-table situation. Each of us was told to bring a ten-minute presentation. The first day he tries to establish a kind of empathy between himself and the men, and among the men. He gives you an idea of what to expect during the seminar. Then you give your presentation. He asks the others to critique it: first, what was good about it, then what were the weaknesses. You begin to get some insights into what you are doing. The morning of the second day he spends on theory. He passes out a "Presentation Skills Work Book," and explains his hierarchy of communication. Low on the list is one-way, no feeling communication -- like a telegram. Then two-way, no feeling communication -- again like two telegrams or machine messages, and so forth. At the top of the list is two-way live communication and liking each other. Peter spends a lot of time on the theatrics -- eye contact, gesturing, how to use an easle and a magic marker, etc. In the afternoon, I redid my presentation, this time he videotaped me and I saw myself and what I was doing. If he catches something special you're doing that he can help with, he works with you individually. With me, he had me roll up a newspaper and beat a desk as I spoke, and made me keep at it -- to bring up my volume and energy level.

Communispond puts the emphasis on technique. "Its a science thing, rather than psychology," explains Nancy Heckel, manager of that company's New York office. "The people who come to us

are all important executives. They have the intelligence; what they have to learn is to control their nervousness, to get some belief in themselves," she said. Communispond's two-day program calls for each student to be up on his feet speaking as much as possible. In the first day, he's on his feet three times. Communispond works in groups of from 14 to 20, and makes extensive use of videotape. To teach speech organization, Communispond uses a kind of TV storyboard device.

To those of us in Academe, the fees charged for these speech classes may come as something of a shock. The two-day seminars range in price from $1500 to $8000. The workshop teachers charge about $1500 for ten 90-minute sessions, with a class of 15. As the number of students increases, so does the charge. The going rate seems to be around $100 an hour for individual coaching. In a word, it pays well.

Is it worth it? Are these agencies getting their money's worth? All of the agencies that now have programs felt that they very definitely were getting their money's worth, and were enthusiastic in their praise of them. "Everyone who was a good speaker, is now a better one, and those who were lousy speakers are now good speakers," extolled one personnel director. Four executives with agencies that do not have speech programs were skeptical, and doubted that there was any lasting value to such speech training. "You're not going to change anybody's speech in two days," one personnel director stated, and another

executive said he had seen no improvement in the men in his agency who had been through such a program. Academicians have criticized this kind of speech training as "pure cosmetics." "It's lop-sided toward theatrics, gimmicks and 'buzz-words' rather than being based on a sound understanding of the principals of effective communication. It's 'ten easy ways to find God and good speech,'" said one professor.

One consultant responded to this criticism by stating that business speech teachers are simply adapting their teaching to the realities of the business world. "These are busy men with a lot of responsibilities," he said. "They don't have all the time in the world to devote to this kind of 'extra-curricula activity.' I try to get in as much as I can in the time they have to spare." "Also," he added, "we live in an 'instant' world. We want everything right now -- instant coffee, instant orange juice ... instant speech."

One area in which both these speech consultants and the agencies for whom they work feel some instant change is needed is in the way speech is taught today in American schools. Much of what they had to say, I think most of us would agree with: that speech training should be started much earlier than it is, that there should be more speech courses given in college, that more speech courses should be required courses, that standards

for speech should be higher. "There should be more schooling in just plain basic speech," one executive said, "and then in the derivatives of it, like oral interpretation. As it is, there's no chance to exercise in speech. Everyone needs exercise -- to have someone listen to him, to be made conscious of how he's coming across." Almost everyone I spoke to felt that speaker-confidence, organization of material and practice, practice, practice were the major needs, and that colleges should be doing something about them.

Most felt too that college speech departments should be more in touch with the business world's needs, and that more training in the use of visual aids, microphone and television should be added to curriculums. Debate, small-group discussion, and how to conduct meetings also deserved more stress.

Everyone of the executives felt that the importance of such education could not be overstated. 17 of the 25 could think of specific cases in which an executive was either fired or not promoted solely because of deficiencies in oral communication.

Yes, James R. Moore is a speech major. As such, and as a businessman, he is listening not only to his own speech but also to that of the students we graduate. Are we communicating as effectively as we ought to be?